

FUNDING CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

WHAT WE DID. WHAT WE LEARNED.



EDUCATION PROGRAM REFLECTION



This philanthropic partnership with some of the largest youth-serving organizations in the country spans six years, involves a system of diverse supports, and builds organization and field-level capacity to advance character, social-emotional learning, and developmental outcomes in young people. The process used and lessons learned may benefit other funders pursuing similar outcomes in out-of-school time settings.

OVERVIEW

In 2014, the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation launched its National Character Initiative, committing \$130 million over six years to advance character development practices in youth-serving organizations.

Investments were directed toward organizations working outside the traditional school day and classroom environment to support learning and development that happens during recess, after-school, summer, one-on-one mentoring, sports activities, and nature-based programming. The Foundation collaborated with 13 national youth-serving organizations, several national intermediaries, policy-focused organizations, and the California after-school system. The direct-service organizations involved collectively reach over half of youth ages five to 18 years old in the United States.

The overarching goal of the Initiative was to improve program quality by supporting organizations' ability to collect and make use of data to improve trainings and professional development for adult staff and volunteers. Adult practitioners were identified as the key change agent for program quality and the means to ultimately improve youth outcomes. The Foundation recognized that reaching these outcomes would require time beyond its closing in 2020.

The Initiative was anchored in a system of supports to strengthen and improve organizational effectiveness, connect grantees to one another, and elevate the overall field of youth development. It featured:

- Introductory and multi-year grants, which varied significantly as each was responsive to the unique needs of organizations in different stages of learning and development
- An overarching emphasis on evaluation and continuous improvement
- Structured peer learning opportunities for staff in similar roles across grantee organizations
- Support for coordinated advocacy across grantee organizations
- Access to field experts and consultants
- Assistance with communications and storytelling

This brief provides Foundation staff's reflections on the Initiative, including progress made and lessons learned.

Backdrop: Shaping a major national strategy to benefit youth

The Foundation historically invested in California-based youth organizations and education systems to support high-quality learning experiences for youth. With the decision to spend down by 2020 and effect significant and enduring change, the Foundation designed its first and only national initiative, allocating a total of \$130 million over six years.

The vision for the Initiative came from the Foundation's founder and board chair, Stephen D. Bechtel, Jr., who viewed his experiences in the Boy Scouts of America as a catalyst for his success later in life. He believes in character development as a path for youth to become civically engaged, and to have important opportunities to interact with positive adult role models.

With that direction and framework as guidance, the Foundation worked closely with consultants including the Bridgespan Group to better understand the character development field and potential investment opportunities. Foundation board members were interviewed by Bridgespan to describe the character strengths they felt were important for young people to develop. They identified courage, empathy, fairness, integrity, respect, responsibility, teamwork, and work ethic as high priorities.



Character is about perseverance and working hard ... being a team player and doing your part ... and having a positive influence on others. These values allow you to be constructive in what you do and improve your effect on the community around you.

– FOUNDATION BOARD MEMBER

Foundation board members also noted the importance of adults as mentors and role models in fostering positive decision-making and character strengths in youth. This observation aligned with research on positive youth development which consistently cites adult training, skills development, and relationships with youth as vital to helping youth achieve positive developmental outcomes.

THE NATIONAL CHARACTER INITIATIVE

With belief in positive youth development, awareness of opportunities in the field, and an aligned board and staff, the Foundation developed four main objectives:

- 1. Elevate the importance of character development in youth-serving organizations.** The Foundation endeavored to help organizations advance their ability to mentor and model character development in the young people they serve, with the goal of providing youth with opportunities to grow into happy, healthy, and caring adults.
- 2. Improve adult practice in youth-serving organizations.** The Foundation wanted to advance knowledge in improving adult practice and transfer that knowledge to practitioners through training and professional development.
- 3. Improve the quality of programming in youth-serving organizations.** The Foundation sought to boost program quality by enhancing grantee organizations' ability to collect and make meaning of data. Building a culture of learning within organizations supports data-driven improvement and helps bridge the gap between research and practice.
- 4. Foster sustainability of youth-serving organizations focused on character development.** The Foundation intended to elevate appreciation for the importance of character development in the broader field and identify ways for stakeholders (including other funders and leaders in youth development) to collaborate and build a shared, sustained movement. In doing so, the Foundation supported organizational infrastructure, including investing in organizations that had a track record for intentional character programming but needed to improve training of staff and volunteers throughout their systems and affiliate networks.

About the grantees

The Foundation chose to form a partnership with 13 national youth-serving organizations that could infuse constructive character development practices across their affiliates and related programs. The Foundation also selected six California-based intermediary organizations that could integrate character development and social-emotional learning into quality improvement efforts in the state's publicly funded after-school programs; these programs served students at a scale similar to some of the national youth-serving organizations. Finally, the Foundation supported a set of policy and field-building organizations that could advocate for and develop tools to improve character development.

In selecting grantees, the Foundation began by collaborating with the Bridgespan Group, a nonprofit organization that provides management consulting to nonprofits and philanthropists, to conduct a landscape scan of character development programs nationally. Bridgespan also provided recommendations for how the Foundation might have the greatest opportunity for impact among the identified organizations and their leadership.

The Foundation subsequently engaged La Piana Consulting to assess a smaller set of organizations named in the landscape scan, focusing on the leadership commitment and readiness required to manage change. From this review, the Foundation invited a group of organizations to submit short-term grant proposals.

The Foundation and La Piana Consulting evaluated proposals and selected an introductory group of grantees by considering four key attributes:

- **Reach and population served.** Out-of-school-time providers that served large numbers of youth ages five to 18 years old, or that served young people in areas where few youth-serving organizations existed.
- **Alignment of mission.** Organizations whose mission focused on character development and were within one of the five target cohorts (leadership, sports/play, nature, policy, and California-based; see Exhibit 1).
- **Commitment of leaders.** Organizational leadership's receptivity and commitment to the purpose and work of the Initiative as well as willingness to learn from and share with others.
- **Organizational capacity and stability.** Organizations that were in sound financial health and would be able to both effectively use funding toward their proposed goals and sustain funding after the grant period ended. Some organizations were in a financial rebuilding phase and some needed infrastructure upgrades. In these cases, the Foundation assessed their evolving capacity to absorb funding and achieve lasting improvement.

Organizations selected for introductory grants were categorized into the five themed cohorts described in Exhibit 1 and grouped below.

GRANTEES SUPPORTED BY THE FOUNDATION

Leadership



Sports & Play



Nature



California



Policy



EXHIBIT 1. GRANTEE COHORTS

Leadership – nationally recognized organizations that have served generations of young people.

Sports and play – organizations that develop the skills of coaches and highlight play as a strategy for supporting character development and social-emotional learning.

Nature – organizations that develop character through experiences in nature.

Policy and field-building – policy and advocacy organizations as well as influential thought leaders in character development.

California-based grantees – California Department of Education and a set of collaborating intermediaries working to improve the quality of publicly funded after-school programs while infusing character-building practices into those programs.

System of supports

The core investment strategy for the National Character Initiative consisted of direct grantmaking to the organizations identified above. The Foundation made introductory grants, with durations up to one year, to these organizations to better assess how to effectively work with them as partners, understand their management structures and challenges, and gain insight into their ability to influence local affiliates/ programs and reach scalable results. Once grantees were able to show progress with the introductory grants, Foundation staff worked with these organizations on larger multi-year grants that would span the life of the Initiative.

In addition to introductory and multi-year grants, the Foundation provided a variety of supports to help grantees achieve their goals and advance internal change. Those supports can be summarized as: (1) deep relationships with Foundation program staff; (2) convenings of representatives from the grantee organizations and their CEOs; (3) communities of practice among representatives with similar roles in their organizations; (4) access to field experts; (5) access to the Foundation's internal expertise on organizational effectiveness; (6) communications assistance; and (7) diversity, equity, and inclusion training in response to grantee requests.

Deep relationships with Foundation program staff

Each grantee was paired with a team of highly engaged program staff who met regularly with grantees in-person, attended their key events and meetings, and held one-on-one monthly calls. Program staff sought to be partners with the grantees, including connecting each with colleague organizations across the Initiative portfolio and with field experts. With the goal of building trusting relationships, staff knew it was important to understand the challenges grantees were facing and help raise visibility of their work through communicating in the field and with other funders.

Through this whole process, it was up to the grantee to determine what they needed. We would ask questions, and based on what we heard, we would identify what type of technical assistance and access to field experts would be helpful [to the grantees].

– FOUNDATION PROGRAM OFFICER

Many grantee organizations were eager to start their projects with literature reviews of research on character development. Rather than support duplicative efforts to surface existing research, the Foundation sponsored a workshop led by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Grantees attended the workshop and met afterward to reflect on the research that had been presented. During this first convening, grantees exchanged their own lessons and experiences with planning, implementing, and assessing character and youth development programs. Following this convening, grantees expressed interest in additional opportunities for practitioner and peer learning.

The Foundation began working with Randel Consulting, a management consulting firm with expertise in meeting design and facilitation, to interview grantees and identify topics of interest as well as additional types of support that would add value to their work.

With Randel Consulting, the Foundation designed convenings of grantees and partners (field experts, other foundations, policymakers, and influencers). Convenings took place annually in the initial years, and expanded to twice yearly beginning in 2019. The meetings featured current research and policy related to character development and served as an opportunity for leaders in the character development field to come together and build knowledge to bring back to their organizations. Each convening was evaluated through participant surveys to improve on structure and to source topics for the next meeting.

We believe in peer learning and listening to the people on the ground; they know best what they need, and we are in the position to support them in their learning and bring them together ... to share with each other what they've learned.

– FOUNDATION PROGRAM STAFF

Communities of practice

Grantee organizations also participated in communities of practice that met during the in-person convenings, and in some cases virtually. Five communities of practice were established, focusing on programming and practice, research and evaluation, policy, strategy, and organizational leadership (this latter group served chief executive officers). Through the communities of practice, grantees share knowledge with each other, collaboratively problem-solve challenges, celebrate successes, explore and initiate steps to become partners on new projects or initiatives, and think about how to bolster the work each organization is doing to have a larger influence on the field.



Photo courtesy of NatureBridge.

The communities of practice and convenings have been some of the most effective ways to support grantees outside of the grants themselves, and I think those relationships will continue beyond the grants. Over the years, our grantees voiced their enthusiastic appreciation for those opportunities, which led us to offer meetings twice a year instead of just once. Participants provided feedback on what was most useful and how to make the experience better, which helped communities continue to improve.

– FOUNDATION PROGRAM OFFICER

Access to field experts

The Foundation provided grantees with access to field experts (see Exhibit 2) who delivered content at the convenings and/or through webinars. Some of these experts worked with individual grantees, responding to their questions and helping them strengthen their organizations in specific areas, such as communication and dissemination as well as research and evaluation.

EXHIBIT 2. FIELD EXPERTS

American Institutes for Research

- Nonprofit, nonpartisan behavioral and social science research, evaluation, and technical assistance organization
- Both a grantee and field expert that supports grantees with understanding research on the science of learning and development as well as helping translate research and policy into practice

Collaborative Communications

- Strategic communications firm
- Helps grantees with communications plans and storytelling

Equity Meets Design

- Diversity, equity, and inclusion advising firm
- Conducted equity workshops during convenings

Forum for Youth Investment

- “Action-tank” supporting practice and providing thought leadership
- Both a grantee and field expert supporting grantees with understanding research and the role of youth development in addressing barriers that lead to inequities for youth, families, and communities

Fowler Hoffman LLC

- Policy strategist
- Advises Foundation staff in support of California-based character grantee organizations and Policy Working Group

La Piana Consulting

- Organizational development and leadership consulting firm
- Helps grantees establish goals and develop grant plans; facilitates CEO community of practice

Randel Consulting

- Management consulting firm
- Oversees convenings, communities of practice, and virtual learning opportunities

Access to organizational effectiveness experts at the Foundation

Program staff also connected grantees to internal experts at the Foundation who were able to offer advice on topics of importance to grant implementation. For example, Foundation staff engaged with grantees to inform their approaches to creating new tools, managing change, and selecting needed consultants – including developing and distributing Requests for Proposals.

Equity grantmaking

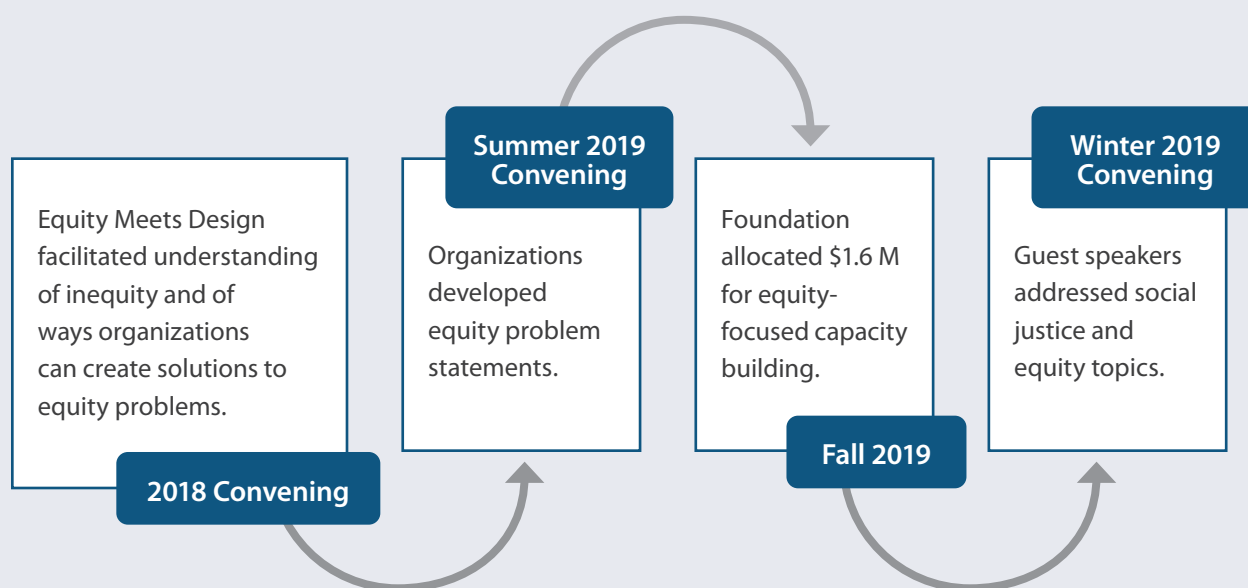
New knowledge about equity issues surfaced from grantees, the broader youth development field, and the Foundation throughout the Initiative. This led to windows for expanded investment by the Foundation, including pursuing opportunities that were not apparent at the beginning of the Initiative.

Starting in 2017, the Foundation noticed growing grantee interest in equity and a shared desire to pursue organizational change to address inequities. The Foundation dedicated the summer 2018 convening to this topic with help from Equity Meets Design, an organization that uses design thinking to address racism and inequity. During that convening, grantees explored issues of equity at the field level. Because grantees were eager to continue the work and to meet with one another, the Foundation shifted to offering convenings twice a year.

In the next gathering, Equity Meets Design shared its tools and framework to help grantees form strategies and chart opportunities to address inequities within their organizations. As grantees took steps to advance internal equity, the Foundation offered additional capacity-building grants to support their work with consultants, including staff trainings.

FOCUS ON DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

Starting in 2017, the Foundation sought to more explicitly prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion in its grantmaking. This illustration summarizes Foundation supports to grantees working to build capacity to address inequities within their organizations.



The Initiative's influence on grantees and the field

The size and breadth of the Foundation's investment elevated the importance of character development in the field. By bringing together grantees, partners, and other funders, the Initiative catalyzed a national conversation on how to foster character development, social-emotional learning, and youth development by focusing on the training of adult practitioners. The Foundation expects that the positive momentum started by the Initiative will continue beyond 2020. Below are a few ways in which Foundation staff believe the Initiative will have a lasting impact.

Systems development. Grantees developed systems to elevate their training and technical assistance offerings, enhance program quality, and strengthen monitoring practices. This included systems for professional development, continuous quality improvement, learning, and performance management.

Data-based decisions for improvement. The Initiative emphasized the benefits of data use and facilitated grantees' collection, sharing, and application of program and organization data to inform decision-making. For example, one grantee had collected more than 15 years of data prior to the grant and had never used it. That grantee has since developed a plan with a research partner to analyze and interpret data to drive organizational improvements.

Boosted grantees' images. Organizations increased their visibility both within their networks and in the field of youth development through storytelling, joint campaigns, and other efforts that included conference presentations, op-eds, and social media. The Foundation funded coaching in storytelling and provided other supports for communications development and outreach.

Greater field collaboration. Through the communities of practice, grantees developed deep and trusting relationships across organizations that previously might have been viewed as competitors. Foundation staff expect those relationships to continue well past the conclusion of grants and official convenings.

Coordinated policy work. Led by the Afterschool Alliance, the policy-focused staff at each grantee organization formed a working group that actively meets to share resources and explore opportunities for collective action.

A California strategic alliance. The grantees supporting California's after-school field chose to align their grant-funded work under one common brand, the 360/365 Collaborative, unifying their approach through a common framework for social-emotional learning. With equity at the center of its work, the collaborative engaged in a year-long process to articulate its values, explore how to support one another's long-term sustainability, and formulate a plan for ongoing collaboration past the Foundation's funding.



Lessons Learned

Looking back on the Initiative, Foundation staff offer the following reflections on what they believe was effective in funding youth-serving organizations:

- **Provide smaller “get to know you/introductory” grants before multi-year investments** to ensure that organizations are ready and able to take on larger culture change work and more significant investments. This issue was particularly important in the case of the Foundation’s larger investments in the leadership cohort. While most grantees had the necessary infrastructure to implement a major grant, it became apparent that a few organizations would have been overwhelmed by significant investments. In those cases, grant sizes were determined by what the grantee could realistically achieve in the grant time frame.
- **Provide continuity of funding through multi-year grants.** Transforming practices in large youth-serving organizations takes time, involves culture change, requires space for learning and development, and requires continued funding across time. Multi-year grants are essential once the grantee and Foundation are clear on what can reasonably be accomplished.
- **Fund in ways that support the big-picture strategy and prioritize relationships with grantees.** In designing large, multi-year grants, it was important to expect shifts in circumstances and organizational disruptions, so Foundation staff maintained an attitude of flexibility in the requirements imposed on grantees. Foundation staff and grantees would periodically revisit grant objectives and work plans as activity progressed and as grantees learned through experience. Foundation staff also listened and reacted within the context of a trusting relationship, believing that “there must be a practice in philanthropy to build trust before building a funded partnership.” Staff used active and empathetic listening to understand grantee challenges and priorities before suggesting change management tactics or shifts in grant goals.
- **Utilize new research and data to inform the work.** Over the course of the Initiative, the field advanced its sophistication and knowledge around what young people need to thrive. Evolving research on social-emotional learning, the Science of Learning and Development (SoLD), and the Aspen Institute’s Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (SEAD) created opportunities for youth development organizations to secure a seat at the table among education leaders. Breakthrough information on how young people learn and grow came to light as the education field was evolving its understanding of how systemic racism and societal inequities create barriers to young people’s success. In this context, Initiative grantees adapted their work and sharpened their presentations of its relevance. They capitalized their new knowledge to elevate the role of youth organizations in the education sector.

Breakthrough information on how young people learn and grow came to light as the education field was evolving its understanding of how systemic racism and societal inequities create barriers to young people’s success.

In hindsight: If we could start over...

Given how long culture change and capacity building takes, particularly at large organizations, Foundation staff would ideally have begun efforts earlier. While the Foundation had supported out-of-school youth programming for many years – particularly in California – character development at national scale was not identified as a board priority until the Foundation spend down was underway. A defined sunset date meant that staff would have relatively little time to plan a significant initiative.

Had there been more time available for initial planning, staff would have:

- 1 Developed more of a research and policy focus, including putting structures in place to document the ways that this Initiative could advance the field.
- 2 Made early strides toward sustainability by looking for funders willing to partner and including them in the planning process with grantees.
- 3 Planned for publications and opportunities to disseminate information to a variety of important stakeholders from the beginning.
- 4 Built even more flexibility into the multi-year grants, so that grantees could have reevaluated their work more easily as the context around them shifted.
- 5 Incorporated a field-building agenda from the outset to reach a greater audience beyond the 13 national organizations. Field-level investments were eventually made through work with the Forum for Youth Investment, American Institutes for Research, National Afterschool Association, and Learning Policy Institute; starting that work earlier might have created more opportunity for field-wide influence.
- 6 Considered engaging the 50 State Afterschool Network to elevate effective character development and social-emotional learning practices, reaching a broader swath of the field and disseminating grantee lessons learned through those networks.



COVID-19 IMPACT ON GRANTEES AND FOUNDATION RESPONSE

At the time this reflection is published in summer 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic is having a devastating financial impact on the Foundation's grantees and the broader youth development field. Organizations that are reliant on school fees or other fee-based revenue streams are particularly affected, resulting in massive furloughs and lay-offs, in some cases involving 70% to 90% of staff. The resulting economic downturn is expected to have lasting financial consequences on the field; some estimates suggest that approximately one-third of the local affiliates of the national grantee organizations will be at risk of closing by the end of 2020.

As these organizations face severe financial challenges, the pandemic is profoundly affecting the young people and families they serve. Addressing the mental health, food security, and basic safety needs of youth is a top priority for Initiative grantees despite their weakened capacity.

While the crisis and its consequences are still unfolding, the Foundation addressed grantees' new and urgent needs. For example, the Foundation converted its final in-person convening, originally planned for August 2020, to a virtual learning series that includes a combination of opportunities for grantees. Grantee staff can connect and share strategies and challenges through their communities of practice; gain access to expertise on topics of high importance today – including organizational restructuring, virtual programming, and scenario planning; and participate in briefings on relevant new policy and legislation. The Foundation is also offering some grant extensions, considering flexibility in how grantees may use remaining grant funds, and streamlining reporting requirements. Finally, the Foundation is working with a group of funders to create a pooled fund that will support national intermediary nonprofits to incorporate out-of-school time into education recovery efforts.

Despite the immense challenges caused by the pandemic, Foundation staff are optimistic that the tools, infrastructure, and relationships developed through the multi-year grants and convenings will support recovery for individual grantees and the broader field. Embedding social-emotional learning as well as the science of learning and development in programs will be crucial in supporting the ability of both youth and staff to recover from the trauma experienced as a result of the pandemic and social isolation. Foundation staff hope that youth organizations will be viewed as vital partners engaging with schools to help young people heal, reconnect, and address academic learning loss. Youth organizations might also consider collaborating with schools to provide additional space and adult staff to meet social distancing requirements as educators explore entirely new models of teaching and learning.

This reflection is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/>

Recommended citation:

S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation (2020), *Funding Character Development: What We Did. What We Learned*. doi.org/10.15868/socialsector.37441